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SUBJECT: DEPUTY SECRETARY MEETING WITH AYATOLLAH HUSSEIN AL-SADR

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On December 1 Ayatollah Hussein Ismail al-Sadr, Baghdad's senior Shi'ite cleric, hosted Deputy Secretary Negroponte at his residence attached to the

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Khadimiya mosque complex. Al-Sadr spoke with commitment about his vision of shared U.S.-Iraqi efforts to build a democratic, just, and independent Iraq. However, he lamented mistakes made by the U.S., said current Iraqi political leaders had outlived their usefulness, and that it was time for new non-sectarian leaders to take their places. He described his own efforts to bring Iraqi religious leaders and tribal leaders together to appeal for national reconciliation and to counter the sectarian and external influences threatening the country. The Deputy Secretary was joined by S/I Ambassador Satterfield and PolCouns Tueller. Al-Sadr had no aides present but was accompanied in the discussion and dinner by Mustafa al-Kadhim, head of the Iraq Memory Foundation. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ayatollah al-Sadr extended a warm welcome to Deputy Secretary Negroponte, recalling a previous meeting and

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thanking the Deputy for his deep interest and involvement in matters related to Iraq. At Deputy Secretary Negroponte's request, al-Sadr spoke with few interruptions over the ensuing two hours in his book-lined library and adjoining study where a home cooked meal was laid out. Although still showing some slight signs of a stroke that required travel to Amman two years ago for extended treatment, al-Sadr was energetic, opinionated, and articulate. He spoke candidly about the political leadership, arguing for a non-sectarian approach to government, and at the end of the evening offered an extensive presentation of materials documenting his involvement in religious, tribal, and political reconciliation efforts, as well as educational and charitable projects. While the latter are primarily in Shi'a areas, he proudly highlighted small efforts to begin to provide assistance in Sunni regions. Following are some of the key observations and opinions offered by Ayatollah al-Sadr:

¶3. (C) Operation Fardh wa Qanoon (Baghdad security plan) has been successful to a certain degree, but real progress is blocked by deficiencies in the government. Interference from neighbors, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, has become clear. In addition, Iraq's politicians are following partisan and sectarian agendas rather than working for national goals. The USG has made a mistake in listening too much to these politicians.

¶4. (C) Prime Minister Maliki is an honest man and an Iraqi patriot, but he has surrounded himself with Dawa party advisors who are not up to standard. The United Iraqi Alliance (coalition of Shi'a political parties) has fallen

victim to Iranian manipulation, leading to deep divisions amongst the Shi'a. The two major parties in the UIA, ISCI and the Sadrists, are filled with individuals who owe allegiance to Iran. The two Dawa parties (al-Jaafari group and al-Anzi group) have little standing with the people. Maliki has been unable to withstand an Iranian hand in determining key appointments. The remaining Shi'a independents in the governing coalition either look to Iran for guidance or passively accept Iran's interference.

¶15. (C) Sadr said he wondered about the close relationship the USG appears to have with ISCI, speculating that the U.S. strategy might be to contain the effect of Iran's influence by giving ISCI so much latitude. If that is the U.S. approach, it is not working. "Iran has taken them in," he stated. The U.S. also made mistakes in dealing with the Sadrists. He had urged CPA to capture and convict Muqtada early on. Now his appeal has grown "like a bacteria spreading." It is not too late to cut him down to size and al-Sadr said he was pleased that the U.S. seemed to be pursuing a course to do that.

¶16. (C) Iraqi army and police forces are performing better, Sadr said. But the U.S. needs to rethink the policy of integrating militias and armed groups in the security forces. This will lead to security problems and violence down the road.

¶17. (C) On the current cabinet, Sadr said that he and Ayatollah Sistani had both urged the PM to appoint qualified technocrats in place of individuals whose sole qualification was party or sectarian allegiance. Currently, some of the ministerial appointments were laughable. Political parties and interests are all represented in the CoR, making it the proper venue for sorting out political problems. The cabinet needs to be insulated from political debate and focused on productively performing the functions of government.

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¶18. (C) The state of affairs for the Sunni community is improving somewhat in al-Sadr's opinion. After a long period of being overlooked, Sunni tribal leaders are being brought into the national dialogue. They are Iraqi nationalists, able to rise above ethnic and sectarian differences. Over the past two years, al-Sadr said he has organized a number of meetings to bring tribal leaders together. Similarly, he is engaged in a vigorous effort to bring together leaders of all Iraq's religious communities, parallel to separate series of conferences of scholars and intellectuals. All these efforts are aimed at goading the process of national reconciliation and addressing the failures of the political leadership.

¶19. (C) Al-Sadr's conclusion to his political overview was that a new vision for the future of Iraq is required. New symbols of national unity are required. The current leaders, Sunni and Shi'a, have done all they can and have outlived their usefulness. It is time for them to move on. Al-Sadr said he could not forget that President Bush had articulated a vision of Iraq as the "jewel of the Middle East". He shared that vision and declared that Iraqis would never forget that the U.S. had ended the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, and that Americans along with Iraqis had spilled blood to bring that vision to fruition.

¶10. (U) The Deputy Secretary's Party has cleared this cable.
BUTENIS